

YOUTH MINISTRY IN A HYPER-CONNECTED AND OVER-SCHEDULED SOCIETY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Definition of Terms	3
Abstract	5
The Research	5
The Changing Environment	5
Social Media: Good or Bad?	8
Is Social Media Community?	9
Always Connected, Always “On”	11
Information Overload	13
Continuous Partial Attention	15
Overchoice	17
The Over-Scheduled Lives of Teenagers	19
Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Families	21
Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Relationships	22
Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Learning	23
Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Youth Ministry	24
Hyper-Connection and Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Rest	25
What Does This Mean For Youth Ministry?	27
Conclusion	36
Appendix	37
References	48

Definition of Terms

Adolescence: Refers to the stage of life usually between the ages of 10-21 although it can last as long as age 25 (Steinberg, 2013). Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty and is usually considered to end when they become independent of their parents.

iGeneration: Refers to current 11-14 year olds at the time this paper is being written. The term iGeneration refers to anyone born after 2000, but for this paper it will be used to describe adolescents ages 11-14 since the younger iGeneration were not the subject of this research. This is a relatively new term that started as a nickname for this age group motivated by the fact that this generation has never known a world where the internet is readily available. This term is not widely used as of yet, but it is becoming more and more popular to use and has even gained traction in some academic resources (Rosen, 2010).

Millennials: Refers to current 15-18 year olds at the time this paper is being written. The term Millennial refers to anyone born between 1980-2000 (15-34 years old currently), but for this paper it will be used to just describe adolescents ages 15-18 since the older millennials were not the subject of the research (Stein, 2013, p. 28).

Mixed Method Research: Refers to a research approach that utilizes both the qualitative and quantitative methods of research (Creswell, 2014, p.4). This was the research method used in the Connected and Scheduled Lives of Teenagers informal research that was conducted for this project.

Qualitative Research: Refers to a research approach that gathers information through open-ended questions in a face to face interview (Creswell, 2014, p.4). This was the method used for the youth leader section of the CSLT Research.

Quantitative Research: Refers to a research approach that gathers numerical data through questionnaires filled out by the test subjects (Creswell, 2014, p.4). This was the method used for the teenager section of the CSLT Research.

The CSLT Research: *The Connected and Scheduled Lives of Teenagers Research.* Refers to the informal research that was conducted for this project. For this research 246 adolescents from 10 different churches between the ages of 11-18 years old were interviewed via questionnaires (quantitative). Each youth pastor of the youth groups interviewed were also interviewed via a recorded conversation (qualitative) with the researcher.

Social Media: Refers to any type of communication done electronically that users use to create online communities where they share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (Social media, 2014). Some examples of social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, texting, and blogs.

Students: Refers to adolescents between the ages of 11-18. The term “teenagers” usually refers to adolescents between the ages of 13-19, and the term “tween” is often used to describe adolescents 9-12 year olds (Adolescence, 2014). However, for simplicity reasons the term “student” will be used to describe 11-18 year olds throughout this project.

Abstract

There has been a societal shift towards hyper-connection and over-scheduling. This has led to many questions from those in the world of youth ministry on how this shift towards hyper-connection and over-scheduling has impacted youth ministry. This informal study explored the causes and affects of this viewed societal shift of hyper-connection through the growth of the use of social media, and the increasingly over-scheduled lives of students and their families. More importantly this informal study sought to answer how youth workers can best minister to adolescents in the midst of this cultural shift that has affected so many aspects of their lives.

The Research

The Connected and Scheduled Lives of Teenagers Research (CSLT) was an informal study that was conducted for this project. The CSLT Research utilized the mixed method research approach that used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For this research 246 adolescents from 10 different churches between the ages of 11-18 years old (Appendix 1) were interviewed via questionnaires. 55% of the students were female, 45% were male, and 4 students did not disclose their gender (Appendix 2). This was the quantitative part of the research. The qualitative portion of this research project focused on the youth pastors of the youth groups that participated in the quantitative portion of this study.

The Changing Environment

The growing technology available for us in our personal lives have revolutionized our daily lives more than we could have ever predicted. “Ten years ago no one would have believed

that a cell phone would be the clearinghouse for everything in a person's life short of cooking dinner" (Sweet, 2012, p.29). The access people have to technology across the world has grown faster in some areas of the globe more than the access to more necessary amenities. According to the United Nations more people around the world (6 billion) have mobile phones than have access to toilets (4.5 billion) (UN on global sanitation crisis, 2013).

Not that many years ago the researcher was sitting in a media and broadcasting class during his junior year of college and listening to the professor talk about how one day we will get all of our media from something we can hold in our pockets. iPods were already a reality and a part of most people's lives, but this still sounding so amazing and life changing. Let's be honest, the technology and connection we have to each other through social media has been life changing. Our culture does not always see it's revolutionary effect because our society has changed so quickly in light of this fast developing technology. Clive Thompson, a contributing editor for the New York Times Magazine and columnist for Wired magazine, calls the "new order" of Facebook as being "The most significant intergenerational shift since rock 'n roll" (Rice, 2009, p.85).

These changes can be intimidating for many in youth ministry. The rise of hyper-connection through advances in technology, and the growing amount of choices and expectations for the average teenager that has fostered a lifestyle of over-scheduling is changing the world youth workers minister in. It has become harder for youth workers to get their message out through the noise in a student's life, church attendance is sporadic for most students at best, and many of the programmatic formulas that have been used for years are not fusing within the current context anymore. It can be tempting for youth workers to resist the change going on the,

and spend all of their time and energy fighting these cultural shifts from happening. But it is important to remember the words of Leonard Sweet, “Christianity is and always has been a religion of incarnation. It puts on flesh and blood. As a living and breathing faith, it is inescapably material, physical, and cultural. Christianity speaks into the locative case” (Sweet, 2012, p.28). This culture of hyper-connection and over-scheduling is the current “locative case”, and those in youth ministry are called to minister in the midst of this shifting culture. As Charles Wesley wrote in his 1762 hymn, “A Charge to Keep I Have,” “To serve the present age, my calling to fulfil, O may it all my powers engage, to do my master’s will.” This is our present age, and we have the “calling to fulfil” of ministering to students within their own culture in the midst of hyper-connection and over-scheduling.

Fear is a normal response to changes like the ones being seen in the current culture today because it has many unhealthy aspects to it, and it threatens our own comfort in the way we have always done things. As one youth leader said in the CSLT Research, “technology has made things easier, but not necessarily better.” However, it is not productive to simply step back and criticize changes that are perceived as being difficult. It is important to take a serious look at what is actually going on, and figure out the best way to minister to students in the current climate. A big part of ministry is practicing the art of adaptation. As Young and Kinnaman (2013) put it, “we had to adapt to the Industrial Age, and we will adapt to the Information Age. But we have to recognize there are both pitfalls and potential in adapting to this new world — a world in which we are all hyperlinked” (p. 31). That is simply what this project seeks to do: to explore and highlight the experiences regarding these cultural shifts, to “recognize both pitfalls and potential” in these shifts, and seek out how to effectively minister to students in the midst of

these perceived shifts in culture. The first thing to do is to look at social media itself and whether it is helpful or harmful.

Social Media: Good or Bad?

The question of whether social media is harmful or helpful does not have a clear answer. When the students were asked in the CSLT Research whether they thought that social media helped or harmed their relationships 36% responded that it helped their relationships, 25% responded that they thought that it harmed their relationships, and 34% responded that it both harms and hurts their relationships. Some (6%) responded “neither”, and 21 students did not respond to the question (Appendix 11). It is impressive that this many students (34%) saw the dichotomy of the effects that social media can have on their relationships. This was impressive to the researcher because they were only asked if it harmed or helped in the question. Both was not given as an option. The students surveyed saw the dichotomy of the effects of social media on their relationships so clearly that they made a point on their own to write in that they saw it as both harmful and helpful for their relationships.

Interestingly both the students surveyed and the youth pastors interviewed identified social media as impacting their relationships both negatively and positively. One youth leader said during their interview that “social media, and technology for that matter, is a tool just like a knife. It can be used to create (help) or to kill (harm). It’s all in how you use it.” Granted some youth pastors had more negative things to say about social media than others, but they all had plenty of positives to list as well.

Social media is an inanimate thing that is morally neutral in of itself. The results of how it affects our lives come from the users of said media. Social media can be a blessing and a curse in our society. For example many of the youth pastors from the CSLT Research mentioned how social media can be a great tool for ministry by making it easier to connect with teenagers and follow up with new kids after they visit youth group for the first time. It also gives youth workers and students a place to share stories and pictures from youth ministry events. Plus it often gives youth workers an insiders view into a student's life. However, as the same youth pastors pointed out, it can also make it difficult for teenagers to focus on what is actually going on around them. It can also create information overload, unhealthy relational habits, and a narcissistic outlook on life. It is important to see how it has become harmful and helpful in the lives of students and ways that we can minister within our ever changing world.

Is Social Media community?

We are relational beings created by a relational God. In Genesis 1:26 God says, "Let *us* make mankind in *our* image,". God's very nature is relational. We see that expressed in the use of the pronouns *us* and *our* in that creation passage. This gives insight into the relational nature of God, and mankind's created relational nature. Humans are created as relational beings by a relational creator. Mankind was created to be in relationship with God and with each other. "At the root of human existence is our great need for connection: connection with one another, with our own hearts and minds, and with a loving God who intended intimate connection with us from the beginning" (Rice, 2009, p.28).

Sadly, mankind does not always live out community as they were created to do.

Facebook, one of the largest social media platforms on the internet, grew out of the very essence of people starving for our ingrained need for connection, and a place to belong (Rice, 2009, p.51). Social media has grown in popularity in large part because it has become a place where many feel at home. *Home* is a term often to describe a place where we feel safe, known, cared for, loved, and where we belong (Rice, 2009, p.51). The Dutch Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen (1986), says in his book *Lifesigns*:

Probably no better word summarizes the suffering of our time than the word, “homeless”. It reveals one of our deepest and most painful conditions, the condition of not having a sense of belonging or of not having a place where we can feel safe, cared for, protected, and loved. (p.38)

People gravitated to Facebook because they were already sensing a lack of “home” in their lives. Human beings need community, and many have sought out community through social media.

The question is if social media is a proper expression of community in our lives. Some scholars such as Scot McKnight have said that it may not be going too far in denying that what happens for many online to be actual community (Rice, 2009, p. 166). However, that does not mean that these virtual communities do not have any value. As Shane Hipps puts it, “When I say that ‘virtual community’ is not ‘community,’ that does not mean it has no value. I know that all kinds of deeply meaningful connections and interactions happen online all the time... I just don’t call it ‘community’”(Rice, 2009, p.168). This type of pseudo-community deserves to be taken seriously, but it should not be used as a means for the type of depth mankind was created for in an authentic community.

The type of authentic community that we were created for involves more depth than what can be accomplished online. This community requires more from us than the “disembodied clicks of “add as a friend” (Rice, 2009, p. 169). However, the reality is that for a growing number of millennials “community” is not understood as a dichotomy between “real” or “online” relationships, but as a composite of both (Rice, 2009, p. 170). In the midst of this “reality” what needs to be understood is that true community can stand alone in offline relationships, but cannot stand alone in online relationships. Online communities have a place, but alone they are simply pseudo-communities. For the type of authentic community that God created the human race to participate in to take place there needs to be a deeper layer of connection than what the online world can provide. Social media is a great tool for connection, but it cannot be the end-all for community needs. The problem arises for many of the students when social media becomes the place where their closest support community is expressed. This may have a lot to do with the ability and sometime obligation they feel to always be connected with technology.

Always Connected, Always “On”

Social media and technology in general allows students to be experiencing an always connected, always on framework that can hinder them from disconnecting and getting real rest. This framework has created a world where students are interacting all day almost entirely through a screen (Stein, 2013, p.29). This hyper-connection can lead to added stress and anxiety. As Stein writes in an article for Time Magazine about millennials, “They might look calm, but they’re deeply anxious about missing out on something better” (Stein, 2013, p.29). This leads to what Stein refers to as “phantom pocket-vibration syndrome”. This is that moment when you

think that your phone is vibrating in your pocket, but you find out that it was, in reality, not vibrating (Stein, 2013, p. 29).

Teenagers, however, did not create this paradigm, but have inherited it from the adults in their lives. In an article geared towards office managers Korn agrees with Stein's observations on the dangers of this always connected, always on paradigm. Referring to employees always connected to their jobs through their smartphones she writes, "The benefit of smartphone use may...be offset by the inability of employees to fully recover from work activities while away from the office" (Korn, 2014).

It would also seem that it is not necessarily the lack of available vacation days that is the barrier from getting away and resting. According to a survey conducted by Harris Poll for the jobs website Glassdoor employees who receive paid time off only use 51% of it, on average (Plautz, 2014). "It's clear the word vacation among employers and employees doesn't mean what it did in the past," said Glassdoor's Rusty Rueff. "Before technology allowed us to be connected 24/7, we were more likely to have actually 'vacated' our work or a couple of weeks a year, but now, it appears one full day away is a luxury" (Plautz, 2014). Students are seeing this over scheduled lifestyle in adults, and are mirroring it in their own lives. According to the American Psychological Association's Stress in America survey teens are mirroring the high-stress lives of adults and they are "potentially setting themselves up for a future of chronic stress and chronic illness" (Jayson, 2014).

This pressure to always be connected and "on" has led to stress and a lack of rest that can only come when we disconnect. According to the CSLT Research 19% of the teenagers surveyed spend over six hours a day on social media, and 55% spend over two hours a day on day on

social media (Appendix 9). This may not seem like a big deal considering how much we are all on social media. However, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Canadian Society of Pediatrics children between the ages of six to eighteen should not be exposed to technology longer than two hours a day (Rowan, 2014).

Rowan, who is a pediatric occupational therapist, lists many affects from the overuse of handheld devices including sleep deprivation, mental illness, aggression, obesity and delayed development (Rowan, 2014). Rowan also mentions the connection to attention deficit and the decreased concentration and memory that comes from the overuse of high speed media (Rowan, 2014). The majority of youth pastors surveyed confirmed Rowan's insights by mentioning shorter attention spans, constant distractions, and added stress as a growing factor for the students in their youth ministries with the growth of technology. This lifestyle of constant connection and always being "on" also opens the door for information overload.

Information Overload

There are other issues that can arise with hyper-connection. One of those issues is information overload. According to Google's CEO, Eric Schmidt, "Every two days now we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003". This is scary to think about when you take in account that "as human beings...we can only handle so much information at once. Once we pass a certain boundary, we become overwhelmed" (Gladwell, 2006, Kindle Locations 2113-2114). It is no wonder that according to a Barna Group study 71% of people feel overwhelmed by the amount of information they need to stay up to date (Young & Kinnaman, 2013, p. 23).

Another way to view this state of being overwhelmed with information comes from a recent study from Time Warner's Time Inc. This study found that millennials switch between different media mediums 27 times an hour (Hursh, 2012). This study was conducted for advertisers who are trying to figure out how to get their message out through the constant change and noise that is a normal part of a millennial's life. Millennials are not only switching mediums often, but they are also using multiple media mediums at the same time. According to the Ipsos/Google 2012 Teens and Twenty-Somethings Research Study 92% of Americans between the ages of 13-24 "engage with at least two devices simultaneously" (2012). Youth leaders can feel the same struggle as advertisers with having to work hard to get the message through all the noise in a teenager's life. As one youth pastor said during the CSLT Research, "we have become pancake people: we have a large access to information, but low retention."

It was interesting in the CSLT Research that there was not an overwhelming winner in what media teenagers use the most on an average week (Appendix 7). TV rated the highest with 79%, texting was not far behind with 77%, and YouTube was even closer behind with 76%. The others were also not that far away (Appendix 7). This supports the Time Warner's Time Inc. study that teenagers use many different mediums and are not loyal to just one. Eight out of the thirteen media options given were chosen as being used at least once a week by over 50% of the students, and the lowest percentage was 24% of students who said that they use magazines/newspapers once a week (Appendix 7). 53% of students said that they used at least eight of the thirteen media choices given once a week, and 3% said that they used all 13 choices available at least once a week (Appendix 8).

This constant switch between mediums is not just for entertainment. According to Larry Rosen, who is a psychology professor at California State University, younger millennials are also using their phones and other mediums as a crutch to lessen their anxiety in social situations (Stein, 2013, p.29). Using their phones as this type of crutch is pulling them into themselves and leaving less room for them to connect with each other face to face. This is not just an issue for millennials or the i-generation, but society as a whole. Make a point to pay attention in line at Starbucks, the bank, or in a store and take note of how many people pull out their phones for that few minute wait. Society has become programmed to isolate so that there does not have to be personal connection when it feels uncomfortable. Students have learned this from the adults in their lives, and have found “safety” from the awkwardness and conflict that life brings during this period of their development. This has stunted many adolescents’ development in dealing with conflict and stress because they depend on the defense mechanism of escaping into their phones when situations such as these arise. They also do not have to deal with issues because they no longer have to give anything their full attention.

Continuous Partial Attention

The constant overload of information can also lead to another unhealthy phenomenon in our society called Continuous Partial Attention. In this hyper-connected and over-scheduled society people often make the excuse that they are multitasking, but in most cases the reality is that they are living our lives in “Continuous Partial Attention” as Linda Stone writes in an article she wrote for *BusinessWeek* titled “Continuous Partial Attention -- Not the Same as Multi-Tasking”. She writes that CPA is different from multi-tasking because with multitasking people

are striving to be more productive and efficient. However, with CPA they are motivated by a desire to not miss anything (Stone, 2008). CPA leaves people in a constant state of distraction, lack of focus, and an anxiety that comes from the constant fear that they are missing something.

In the state of CPA people are so preoccupied with trying to keep from “missing out” on anything that they do not even notice how this is making them overstimulated and unfulfilled (Rice, 2009, p.103). CPA leads to over-stimulation and the lack of fulfillment in their lives as well. It also has led to more attention and stress related diseases. Living in a state of CPA also sets off a cascade of stress hormones such as norepinephrine and cortisol (Stone, 2008). This becomes a real issue because as Stone points out:

As a hormone, cortisol is a universal donor. It can attach to any receptor site. As a result, dopamine and serotonin, the hormones that help us feel calm and happy, have nowhere to go because cortisol has taken up the available spaces. The abundance of cortisol in our systems has contributed to our turning to pharmaceuticals to calm us down and help us sleep. (Stone, 2008)

It would seem that even biologically humans are wired to be “present” with each other and with their environment. This type of “presence” that human beings are wired for cannot happen without focus. Focus is crucial for brain development and for actual learning to take place. As Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.(2013), who is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine says:

The brain is built to focus on one thing at a time, processing it into more elaborated forms, connecting it to similar items, linking it to others, and then consolidating all of the

neural firing into long-term structural changes...in short, when you pay close attention, you optimize neuroplastic changes that are the basis for learning. (p. 288)

The human brain cannot learn and grow to its full potential when individuals never focus on one thing long enough for this process to take place. This cultural trend of Continuous Partial Attention goes against human biology, and is hindering its long-term learning for both adolescents and adults. As mentioned in the previous section, our culture has access to and consumes more information than has ever been available in the history of mankind. However, as Siegel points out, people may be consuming an abundance of information, but very little of this information is being retained into actual learning. Taking time to focus on the present moment or task is a reminder of the importance of keeping the mind well honed and to be lifelong learners (Siegel, 2013, p.290). One factor that has contributed to the trend of continuous partial attention is living in a culture dealing with so many choices that it has really become overchoice.

Overchoice

Overchoice is a product of the current hyper-connected society and “creates a world of too many options” (Rice, 2009, p.101). The dangers of overchoice, however, is a part of both hyper-connection and over-scheduling. Let’s first talk about over choice in connection with our hyper-connected world since in many respects that is where it originates. Through overchoice our culture has the illusion that it does not have to choose, and that they can have it all. This is causing people to be consumed by information and by their schedules. In this hyper connected world of overchoice individuals can easily forget how to say, “no”. What they need to realize is that every time they say, “yes”, to one thing they are saying, “no”, to something else.

Roy Williams said this in his book about advertising called, *Does Your Ad Dog Bite?*: “The average American cannot say “no.” This is why he or she is average. The temptation which defeats the average American is a thing called Overchoice, a deceiver which whispers, “You don’t have to choose. You can have it all” (Rice, 2009, p.101). The problem is that people cannot have it all, and society is lying to itself when it lets overchoice take over their lives like this. When humans have too many choices this leads to the illusion of control. Hyper-connection itself is the experience of too much control in light of having too many choices in our interpersonal connections (Rice, 2009, p.101). “Overchoice keeps us average because it prevents us from focusing for very long on any one thing. And focus is absolutely essential to doing things well, whether it’s building a model boat or building a relationship” (Rice, 2009, p.101).

This over choice is also a huge factor in the over-scheduling of families schedules. Clinical psychologist, Michelle Kees, says that “there’s been an explosion in the number of extracurricular activities available to kids and teens over the past 15 years or so and teens feel pressure to get involved in many of them. The result is that some teens are booked to the point of exhaustion” (Paulos, 2007). One youth leader interviewed mentioned that she sees parents encouraging their students to over-schedule because it makes them feel like they are successful as parents when their kids are involved in many different activities. She went on to talk about the struggle of trying to free families from this mindset.

This illusion that society has created that no one has to choose because they can have it all was evident in the student surveys conducted for the CSLT Research. In all four of the questions that asked for students to pick just one response multiple students chose multiple

responses (Appendix 3, 4, 5, 10). This worldview that we do not have to choose was especially evident in the question “How do you prefer to communicate with your friends”. For this question 65 out of the 246 students chose multiple responses (Appendix 10). That means that over 26% of students believe in this concept of not having to choose just one so much that they went against the instructions of the question to choose multiple “preferences”. This is a great insight into their thinking process when it comes to communicating and scheduling. No wonder students are overwhelmed with information and schedules. They do not know how to choose, because they are taught that they do not have to. Many are also taught that winners can do it all. This has also led to the unhealthy trend of over-scheduling in the lives of many teenagers.

The Over-Scheduled Lives of Teenagers

In addition to being hyper-connected students are becoming increasingly over-scheduled. “More and more teens are juggling homework with after-school activities, volunteer work, and jobs, and are exhausted from the effort" (Hurley, 2004). This trend of increasingly busy schedules for teenagers has been increasing since 1981. In the 1980s teenagers had on average 12 more hours a week of free time than teenagers at the beginning of the millennium (Hurley, 2004). Schedules continue to get more packed to the point that many teenagers are confused when asked what they do when they hang out (Hurley, 2004).

Students are feeling the affects of this over-scheduled lifestyle. According to the CSLT Research only 23% of teenagers surveyed said that they felt rested and content (Appendix 5). 48% of the teenagers surveyed said that most days they felt stressed and overwhelmed, and 29% said that felt bored most days (Appendix 5). With such a busy and overstimulated lifestyle most

students move between the world of boredom and stress, and lack a middle ground of contentment. This lack of a healthy middle ground causes students to often live in a world of constant stress as the results from the CSLT Research shows. David Elkind defines stress as “any unusual demand for adaptation that forces us to call on our energy reserves over and above that which we ordinarily expend and replenish in the course of a twenty-four-hour period” (Elkind, 2001, p.166). The scary thing is that the “unusual demand” of stress is becoming less and less unusual in the everyday life of a teenager.

The majority of youth leaders interviewed in the CSLT Research resonated with Chap Clark’s insights from his book, *Hurt*, (2004) where he states:

The ever mounting demands on their (teenagers) time and energies; the heightening expectations from coaches, bosses, and activity leaders; the steadily increasing proliferation of homework; and the accessibility to many communication options make the typical day in the life of a midadolescent a balancing act. (p.136)

One youth leader made the observation about his own ministry context that he has seen a drastic shift where his middle schoolers are dealing with stress that used to be reserved for adulthood. The problem is that the average adolescent is not equipped and should not be expected to have to deal with the balancing act that their life often requires. They are often so busy just trying to balance their lives that it “keeps them from having to reflect on their dreams, their relationships, and their lives” (Clark, 2004, p.144). This can also affect their faith as one youth pastor pointed out in the CSLT Research: “busyness seeps in and hinders what we are able to internalize as a Christ follower and makes it hard for us to keep Christ at the center of our lives.”

Students, of course, did not create this over-scheduled world, but instead learned it from adults. They are seeing this over-scheduled lifestyle in adults, and are mirroring it in their own lives. According to the American Psychological Association's Stress in America survey teens are mirroring the high-stress lives of adults and they are "potentially setting themselves up for a future of chronic stress and chronic illness" (Jayson, 2014). As David Elkind says in his book *The Hurried Child*, "Today's child has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress—the stress borne of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations" (Elkind, 2001). One youth pastor observed during the CSLT Research interviews that, "busyness is a stamp of pride for a lot of our families that makes them feel important. They think that if their kids are busy then they are doing their job as parents."

Over-Scheduling's Effect on Families

According to Hurley (2004) a busy schedule also means less time to spend time with family. However, one of the biggest surprises of the CSLT Research was that 49% of students surveyed claimed that they eat a meal around a table with their family everyday (Appendix 4). Every youth pastor interviewed, however, did not agree with their students' responses. This would have been a good question to follow up with students on, especially since it's possible they interpreted the question differently than the intent of the researcher. Some youth pastors thought that the idea of eating around a table is so foreign to them that the students just counted anytime they ate in their own house, and some stated that they thought that they did not want to give the honest answer out of embarrassment.

As unrealistic as these statistics seem there should be a hope for it to be true. “According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA), kids who regularly eat dinner with their families are less likely than other kids to smoke, drink alcohol, or use illegal drugs” (Hurley, 2004). In this same research CASA also includes attending religious services as another family activity that keeps kids out of trouble (Hurley, 2004). The challenge occurs when the parents themselves are not taking enough time off to foster these habits for their families.

Some studies show that 37% of Americans take fewer than seven days off per year, and 61% say that they do some type of work on vacation (Allender, 2009, p. 50; Plautz, 2014). Time is the currency of the day, and most families do not feel like they ever have enough of it. The Wall Street Journal found in a survey they conducted in 1996 that 40% of Americans say that lack of time was a larger problem for them than the lack of money (Allendar, 2009, p.50). It would be scary to see how much that percentage has gone up in the 18 years since the survey was conducted.

Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Relationships

If “relationships require, among other things, *time*” (Rice, 2009, p. 110) as Rice states then it is no wonder that teenagers are lacking depth in their relationships, and must settle for the surface level connections that social media can provide. Social media can seem convenient in making connections in the midst of an over-scheduled lifestyle. But the depth of these connections is lacking. Social media turns our friends into audiences and us into performers (Rice, 2009, p.112). It is no wonder that some have called the millennial generation “entitled

narcissists” (Stein, 2013). One of the reasons for the creation of this issue is that society is not carving enough time for relationships to be anything deeper than this.

Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Learning

Our cultural shift towards over-scheduling has even affected the learning process of teenagers in schools. Sadly, many schools have bought into the trend of emphasizing “competition instead of collaboration, on achievement rather than creative exploration” and this makes many teenagers shut off from the learning experience (Siegel, 2013, p. 290). It is understandable why the schools would shift this direction since collaboration and creative exploration are hard to create statistics and hard data to report on to the administration. At the same time competition and achievements make a school feel like they are making a difference when sadly the opposite is sometimes the case.

Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Youth Ministry

Students are simply too busy. When the students were asked what the most common reason that they do not attend a youth ministry event 68% said that it was because they were too busy (Appendix 3). That is an overwhelming amount of students who are saying that it is not the cost of the event, interest in the event, having something better to do, or their friends not going that keeps them from being able to attend youth ministry events. This is enlightening, but also frustrating for youth ministries. Youth pastors and youth workers have often approached events with the mindset that if it is a good enough event, and it is affordable then students will attend. And, if those factors do not work then the issue might be connected to students’ friends

attendance of the event. The CSLT Research found, however, over-scheduling to be the prominent factor in teenager's attendance of youth ministry events, and as one youth pastor from the CSLT Research said, "when you over-schedule everything becomes less important."

This dilemma, so described above, presents significant challenges for youth pastors and youth workers. These are tough challenges because many of the factors are beyond a youth worker's control. Most youth workers know how to make events more interesting. They also are well aware of how to raise funds to keep the events cheaper financially. But adapting to the busyness of teenagers while at the same time still having an active youth ministry is challenging. As one youth leader said in the CSLT Research, "It's hard to compete with the busyness" of students.

When asked in the CSLT Research interviews if they would agree that their students are becoming increasingly over-scheduled every youth pastor except for one responded with an emphatic, "Yes!". The one youth leader who did not agree cited her ministry context as unique because she ministers to many homeschooled students and other described "outcast" kids who do not get involved in many school activities so youth group is their only social outlet. This youth pastor and youth ministry represented the one exception in the area of over-scheduling in the CSLT Research.

The youth pastors were not only asked what affects they have seen from over-scheduling, but also how they have adapted programmatically to this shift. Many mentioned how they went through and cut out events that were not really serving a purpose. They no longer have an event just to have an event or as one youth leader put it "just because". Another youth pastor mentioned how they have everything on the same night of the week. In addition, one youth

pastor mentioned how they offer a meal for teenagers before their weekly youth service because so many did not have time to eat dinner before they came to church. Another youth pastor mentioned that he has set up “routines” in their ministry’s calendar so that families have a better time knowing when events will be taking place. Every youth pastor interviewed showed how they are being creative, and making their ministries effective in the lives of students and their families in the midst of an over-scheduled society.

Hyper-Connection and Over-Scheduling’s Effect on Rest

When over-scheduling takes over a person’s life one of the first casualties is their sleep. When looking at the ability of a student to get the proper amount of rest it is interesting to see the disconnect between their own biology and the schedules society has created for them. “Because the whole cycle of melatonin secretion is shifted later at puberty, this also means that adolescents who have gone through puberty are more sleepy early in the morning than those who are still prepubertal” (Steinberg, 2011, p.40). “One study found that adolescents were least alert between the hours of 8:00 and 9:00am (when most schools start) and were most alert after 3:00p.m., when the school day is over” (Steinberg, 2011, p. 40). Society needs to be sensitive to the fact that students are already living in a world that is not conducive to their own biology.

Hyper-connection is also affecting their quality of sleep. According to the CSLT Research students are getting a decent amount of time for what they consider “sleep”. 80% of students surveyed claim to get at least seven hours of sleep a night (Appendix 6). However, the question is that even though they perceive that they are getting a healthy *quantity* of sleep, are

they getting enough *quality* sleep? A big hindrance in the quality of an adolescent's sleep could be what has been referred to as "the blue screen of death".

The blue screen of death was a term that used to be used to describe when a computer screen would go completely blue with some random code in the top. This would often mean that everything was lost on the harddrive and that you would soon have to go shopping for a new computer. All screens today whether on a phone, tablet, computer, or iPod still emit a blue light like that dying computer, and it has become the focus of a lot of study from scientists in regards to sleep. "Some scientists believe that many adolescents' sleep deprivation stems directly from overuse of computers and cell phones" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 40). This belief is reinforced by studies that conclude that the blue screen emitted by computer, phone, tablet, and iPod screens can have a profound effect on our alertness and abilities to rest. Exposure to self-luminous screens can suppress the body's release of melatonin which is crucial for a health sleep cycle (Wood, Rea, Plitnik, Figueiro, 2012).

Researchers have found that the blue light emitted by computer, phone, tablet, and ipod screens not only suppress the body's release of melatonin, but it also causes your brain to be more alert than caffeine (Beavan and Ekstrom, 2013). Basically, looking at your phone can wake up your brain more than a cup of coffee. A Harvard Business School professor did a study involving 161 workers in a professional setting on how late night use of smartphones, tablets, and TV can actually disrupt sleep and engagement in work the next day. Those workers who given a chance to disconnect on a regular basis became more excited about their work and were more satisfied in their lives (Korn, 2014).

So, even though the students responded that they are getting a decent *amount* of what they consider sleep, the *quality* of their sleep leaves something to be desired. Youth pastors from the CSLT Research are seeing the affects of the lack of quality rest in the students they minister to as well. Multiple youth pastors in the CSLT Research mentioned how their students are constantly tired during the school year, and how quickly they are to want to go sleep on retreats instead of stay up for activities. They are so worn out that they would rather sleep than participate in late night activities with their friends. The human body was never meant to go without quality rest. Taking time to stop and disconnect from our devices is crucial for the human body to receive the rest it needs.

What Does This Mean For Youth Ministry?

Ministering to teenagers in the midst of a culture that is shifting in becoming more and more hyper-connected and over-scheduled presents it's own type of challenges. It brings with it many dangers that we need to be aware of for not just the students we minister to, but for our own well-being as well. However, it also provides many opportunities for youth ministries to fill a void of authentic connection and sabbath that teenagers are missing in their everyday lives.

Ministry Context

My own ministry context at the time this is being written is in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania at a small to medium size Nazarene church. I have been involved in youth ministry for over twelve years, and nine of those years have been at Shippensburg Nazarene. Our youth ministry is called "The Underground", and I will be referring to it by name throughout

this section. The motivation for the topic of this research project was inspired by what I observed happening in the lives of the students at The Underground.

Youth Ministry Implications

There are many implications for those of us crazy enough to be youth workers in the midst of this cultural shift towards hyper-connection and over-scheduling. In the following sections I simply list six implications that I found through the research conducted for this project. The following implications are addressed to youth workers.

1) It starts with us.

As youth workers we must lead by example. We cannot change our society's trend of hyper-connection and over-scheduling if we are not living a healthy, balanced life in these areas ourselves. We cannot teach about a healthy and balanced schedule to families of our students when our own family schedule is just as packed. We must practice balance and sabbath in our own lives as an example to students and their family. We also cannot teach about being present if we cannot stay off our phones ourselves. We need to disconnect sometimes, and also remember that the face to face conversation that we are having with a student takes precedence over the text or email that our phone is alerting us to.

I was happy to find that the majority of youth pastors who participated in the CSLT Research do take a scheduled sabbath once a week and could describe the boundaries they have put into place in detail. Only two youth leaders responded that they do not take a regular sabbath, but both of them talked about how they see the need for it in their lives and are currently

working on making sabbath a reality in their lives. All the youth pastors from the CSLT Research understood that we cannot teach the families of the teenagers in our youth ministries the importance of sabbath if we do not take a sabbath ourselves.

However, the majority of the same youth leaders said that on the average day they feel stressed and overwhelmed. The reasons for their stress range from personal high expectations, school, family responsibilities, and of course youth ministry itself. Ministry can, of course, be stressful at times, but we need to be very protective of our own sabbath and rest. Since my first week at Shippensburg I have had the same day of the week (Monday) as my day off. I have also been very protective of that day. I do not answer my phone, and I do not attend any meetings or events that the church schedules that day. Thankfully I had very wise people in my life early on teach me the importance of protecting my own sabbath day off. There are a few times a year that I do work on a Monday such as missions trip and summer camp, but they are few and far between. I have learned to be so hard and fast about it because this is definitely an area where if you give the church an inch they will take a mile.

2) Keep families informed and equipped on the dangers that come along with hyper-connection and over-scheduling.

We need to remind families that having a child that is busy does not mean that it is, necessarily, a healthy or successful child. It is okay and important to say “no” to things sometimes, and every “yes” is a “no” to something else. The question is what are parents teaching their kids is the most important through the areas of their lives that they are saying “yes” to. It’s important to take time to slow down, and sometimes as a family be unproductive.

It's important to have evenings once and a while for your family to just have fun together like a game night. Lastly, you need to be honest about areas that your family needs to make changes for their own health and relationships with each other (Hurley, 2004).

At The Underground we send out a newsletter once a month full of great articles written by other people about things that deal with hyper-connection and over-scheduling for families. I post it on our parents blog, and print out hard copies for every parent. This sometimes leads to great conversations when they see an issue in their child's life that was referred to in an article that was in the newsletter. I currently do not have children of my own so this seems to be a better strategy since I cannot show them from my own example as a parent.

3) Relationships still need to be the focus.

This is not a new idea for youth ministry. Relationships have always been the focus of healthy youth ministries. It starts with the youth worker's own relationship with Jesus, and out of that the youth worker's relationship with the students. All the research and studies done about the shift that is happening culturally due to hyper-connection and over-scheduling still overwhelmingly points to the importance of having a youth ministry that is about authentic and intentional relationships. In our world today we have the ability to make connections to more people than ever before in human history. However, quantity does not equal quality. Often the opposite is true. The more connections we make the more the quality of those connections are lessened. Hyper-connection and over-scheduling can easily hinder opportunities for these authentic and deep connections to take place.

Students, just as people of all ages, need to know that they are loved, and that they are called to love others. As Fred Rogers from Mister Rogers Neighborhood says in the documentary, *America's Favorite Neighbor* (2003): "I think everybody longs to be loved, and longs to know that he or she is lovable. And, consequently, the greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they're loved and capable of loving." This statement may seem simplistic and obvious. However, it is profound in its simplicity and insight into human nature. This statement rings true for youth ministry. We need to create space for teenagers to feel loved and learn that they are lovable. But this cannot happen solely through a screen. It can start there, but there needs to be something more.

As youth ministers we must also be present in a student's life. We must practice focus and presence with teenagers if we ever expect to make a difference in their lives. We cannot make a difference in a student's life if we are looking at our phones the entire time we are with them. Being present also means that we need to be slower to try to "fix" their problems, and quicker to drop what we are doing and give them the focus that they are starving for and desperately need. As Dr. Siegel says, "in order to give them (students) what they need most of all, which is to make them feel felt and connected with us, we need to not do these well-intended things (fix or solve their problems or dilemmas) first and instead simply be present for our loved one" (Siegel, 2013, p.218).

A big way that we can be present in a teenager's life is to create space for them to engage in the face to face contact that they crave and need. Teenagers are starving for face to face contact, but they either do not think anyone else wants that or they do not know how to make it happen. As mentioned earlier according to the CSLT Research 59% of students prefer face to

face communication (Appendix 10). Quite a few students also made a point to circle “face to face” and write beside it “preferred” but then drew an arrow to “texting” and wrote “but usually end up doing this”. Youth leaders need to be even more intentional in crossing this barrier for them since phones are used as a crutch to save them from having to deal with the awkwardness and conflict that face to face relationships can bring. We need to teach them how to relate, and create a safe space of community where this can take place.

4) Help families win by setting up routines in your ministry’s schedule

The days of impulse events and last minute changes in youth ministry schedules are over. We need to help parents win by giving them plenty of warning of when events are taking place and communicate clearly what is happening in the youth ministry. Parents have so many schedules to juggle, and youth ministries should make it easier in their planning instead of becoming an added stress in their lives. Setting up routines so that parents can predict when an event is coming is becoming a helpful trend for many ministries. Lastly, do not do an event just to do an event. For many ministries this means doing fewer events, but better quality events.

We also need to accept what one youth leader said in the CSLT Research, “there is not a perfect night to have events for everyone to be able to make it.” And we must accept that church is often secondary for many of the families that we minister to. This is not necessarily because these families do not care, but it is as mentioned earlier one youth leader pointed out “when you over schedule everything becomes less important.”

As another youth leader said in the CSLT Research, “it’s just hard to compete with the busyness.” and “busyness hinders what you can do church-wise”. This is a reality that we

simply need to accept, and program in the midst of. At The Underground all of our major events (winter retreat, missions trip, summer camp, etc.) are always a similar time of year so that parents can almost predict when they will be long before we officially announce the event. This not only helps parent's plan ahead, but it has also given our students routines that give them things to look forward to. We also announce events in advance with all of the necessary information easily available.

5) Students want us to save them from themselves.

Students prefer face to face communication (Appendix 10), but that is not how they usually communicate. Many students (36%) would also prefer to go back to a time before social media (Rideout, 2012). As much as they use and enjoy being hyper-connected they seem to want to be saved from themselves in their use of technology. We cannot expect them to keep a balanced life when it comes to media or their schedules. That is too much pressure. We need to help them find balance, and real connections in their lives. As a CSLT Research participating youth leader said, "they need to be retaught how to connect with each other face to face."

How we do this, of course, depends on our ministry context. One of the youth ministries that participated in the CSLT Research realized a few years back that many of the teenagers who attended their youth group service did not have time to eat dinner before they came to church. This realization led to them starting to have dinner before youth group every week. As the youth pastor said while describing it during the CSLT Research interview, "food promoted this idea that these people care about us". It also created space for face to face conversations to happen naturally. Another win was that this also lessened the rush and stress of the evening for families

since they did not have to try to fit in a meal between their teen's extracurricular activities and youth group. This is a great example of a youth ministry creatively filling a need for families, and creating space for intentional community to take space in their students' lives.

At The Underground we spend a lot of time working on the atmosphere of our youth services and events to make sure we are creating space for authentic community to occur organically. This preparation can sometimes include working on the space itself, reworking the schedule of the event, and most of being ready to drop everything for those times that our students are ready to really connect and share. These times often happen during what I call, "hinge moments". Hinge moments are those times before or after an event, service, or part of a schedule where we are usually focused on what's next or too tired from what just happened. These are often the times that we as youth workers feel the least ready to have an intentional conversation with a student. However, these moments are crucial, and we need to be ready to drop everything in order to focus and give the teenager the face to face focus that they need.

6) Create a new definition of success.

We need to break the illusion that a successful ministry is a busy ministry. Just as a healthy family is not a busy family. We need to break this stereotype. We need to be like many of the youth leaders interviewed during the CSLT Research and not do events just to fill our calendars. We may need to have fewer events, but this gives us the opportunity to put together better quality events. At The Underground we never do any event unless it fulfills at least one of our four points that are tied into our mission statement. These four points (1. Authentic

Community, 2. Theological Study, 3. Social Justice,. 4. Discipleship) give us a clear standard and filter for deciding what events to do as a ministry.

As Patricia Hersch puts it, “What kids need from adults is not just rides, pizza, chaperones, and discipline. They need the telling of stories, the close, ongoing contact, so that they can learn to be accepted” (Clark, 2004, p. 143). One youth pastor understood this concept well and told a story during the CSLT Research interviews of a teenager who shared during the prayer request time at youth group one night how she had only had 5 hours of sleep the past few nights. She then went on to share the many good things in her life that was robbing her of her biologically needed sleep. The youth pastor responded, “why don’t you go home now and go to bed”. The teen did not listen to him, but he showed her that he cared more about her health and wellbeing than the numbers in their attendance. This is a shift in our thinking that needs to happen.

Effective youth ministry is messier and more organic than an attendance report or an event calendar can articulate. This outlook and practice of ministry cannot happen if the youth worker is still dealing with insecurity as a youth leader. Insecurity can be the biggest obstacle for any youth worker in creating a healthy youth ministry. It can also be the cause of burn out for youth workers, and the cause of stress for their own families. Insecurity does not let us say, “no”, and it is not satisfied with a youth ministry that is not over-scheduled. As youth workers we need to address our own insecurities as leaders before we can create a healthy routine in our youth ministries and in our own lives. I will say that insecurity was the biggest obstacle for me during the early years of my own ministry.

At The Underground we have recently worked on identifying the busy times during the school year for our students and have started to schedule fewer events during those times. To “fill the void” for those students who are missing having as many hang out events we are just now starting to tag on small events after our midweek service. These “after party” events range from 30 minutes to an hour and range from having sundaes, game tournaments, or theme parties. These events are easy to do, and do not require another weekday evening for our families or adult volunteers. This is the newest programatic adaption to the busyness of our teenagers, and thus we are still working out the kinks.

Conclusion

We live in a hyper-connected and over-scheduled society. This is our ministry context and our “locative case”. We are called as youth workers to minister to this current generation of students in the midst of this shifting culture. This new paradigm comes with it’s own dangers and opportunities. However, in the midst of this we must remember that any change must start with us as youth workers, we must keep families informed and equipped on the dangers that come along with hyper-connection and over-scheduling, relationships still need to be the focus of our youth ministries, we need to help families win by setting up routines in our ministry’s schedule, we need to save students from themselves, and we need to create a new definition of success for youth ministry.

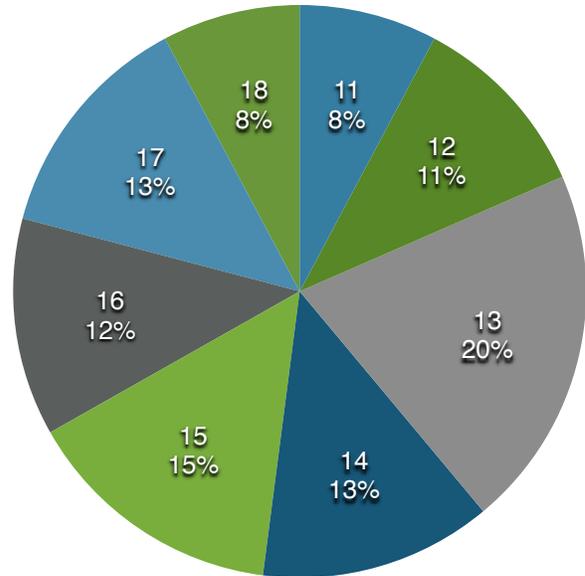
APPENDIX

Appendix 1

AGES REPRESENTED IN CSLT RESEARCH

Ages Represented

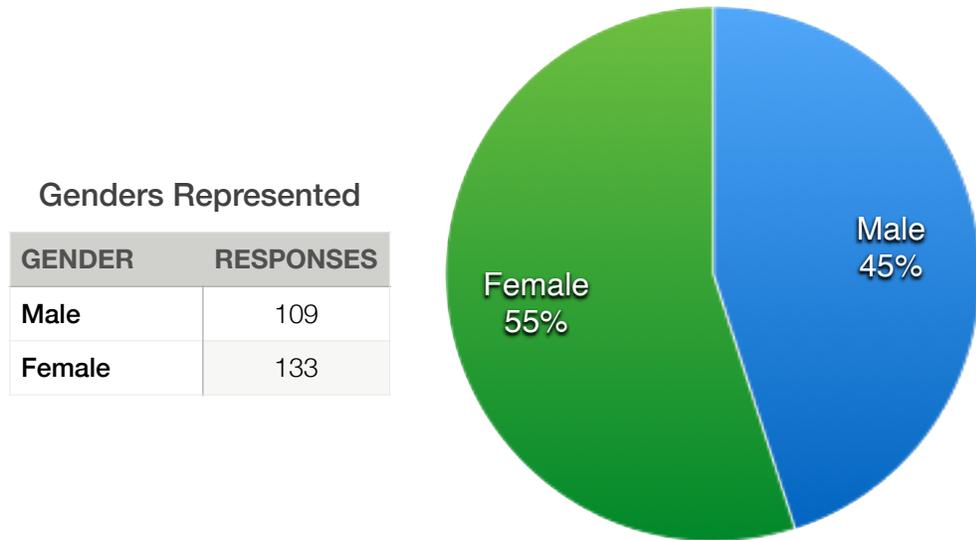
AGE	RESPONSES
11	19
12	26
13	50
14	32
15	36
16	30
17	32
18	19



*2 students did not respond to this question

Appendix 2

GENDERS REPRESENTED IN CSLT RESEARCH



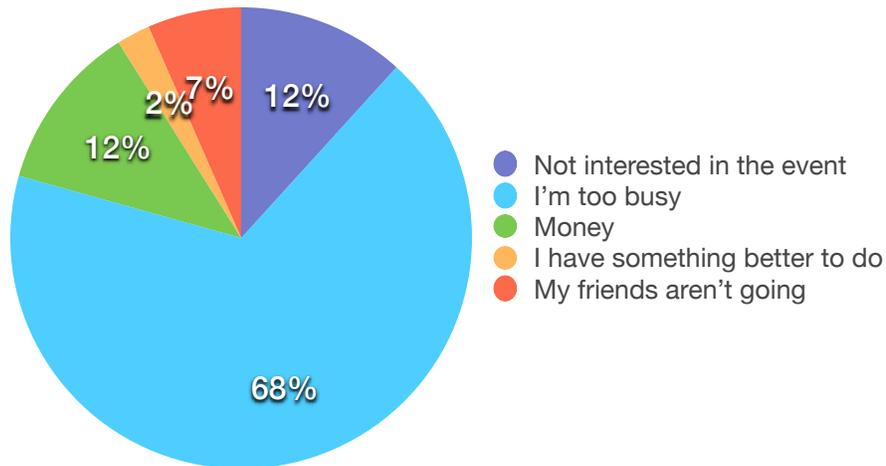
*4 students did not respond to this question

Appendix 3

MOST COMMON REASON STUDENTS DO NOT ATTEND A YOUTH MINISTRY EVENT

1) Most common reason students do not attend a youth ministry event

ANSWER	RESPONSES
Not interested in the event	25
I'm too busy	144
Money	25
I have something better to do	5
My friends aren't going	14



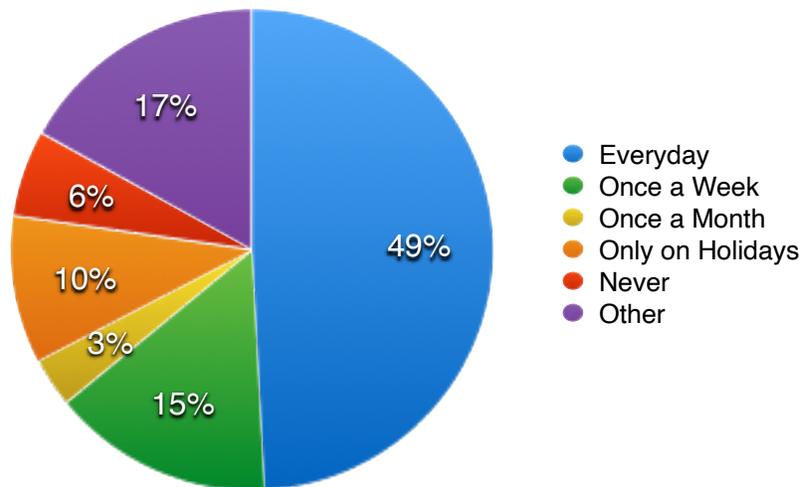
- *7 students did not respond to this question
- *4 students wrote in "I attend all events"
- *1 student wrote in "Other: no ride available"
- *1 student crossed all selections out and wrote in "might have hw or going somewhere that was already planned"
- *2 students wrote in "sick"
- *1 student wrote in "roads are bad!"
- *8 students selected "I'm too busy" and "money"
- *2 students selected "not interested" and "money"
- *2 students selected "not interested" and "friends aren't going"
- *3 students selected "not interested" and "too busy"
- *1 student selected "not interested" and "something better to do"
- *1 student selected all of them
- *none of these responses were included in the data

Appendix 4

HOW OFTEN STUDENTS' FAMILIES EAT A MEAL TOGETHER AROUND A TABLE

2) How often does your family eat a meal together around a table?

ANSWER	RESPONSES
Everyday	119
Once a Week	36
Once a Month	8
Only on Holidays	24
Never	14
Other	41



*1 student selected “once a week” and “once a month”

*1 student selected “once a month” and “holidays”

*1 student chose “everyday” and “once a week”

*1 student selected “once a week” and “only on holidays”

*these responses were not included in the data

Appendix 5

ON AN AVERAGE WEEKDAY WHICH STATEMENT DESCRIBES YOU (STUDENTS)

3) On an average weekday which statement best describes you

ANSWER	RESPONSES
I'm bored	67
I'm stressed and overwhelmed	111
I'm rested and content	52



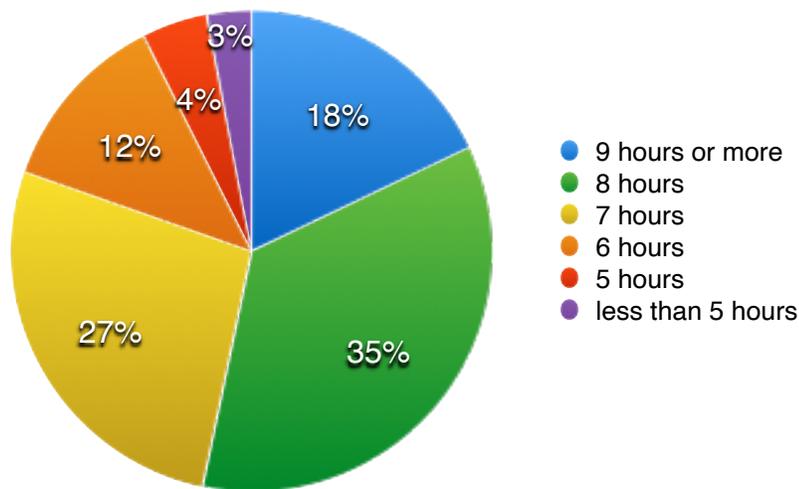
- *1 student circled the words “stressed” and “rested”
- *2 students selected “stressed” and “rested”
- *1 student selected “bored” and “rested”
- *4 students selected “bored” and “stressed”
- *4 students selected all 3
- *1 student wrote in “none”
- *3 students did not respond to this question
- *none of these responses were included in the data

Appendix 6

THE AVERAGE AMOUNT OF SLEEP STUDENTS GET ON A WEEKNIGHT

The average amount of sleep students get on a weeknight

TIME	RESPONSES
9 hours or more	41
8 hours	81
7 hours	62
6 hours	28
5 hours	10
less than 5 hours	7



*12 students didn't give enough information

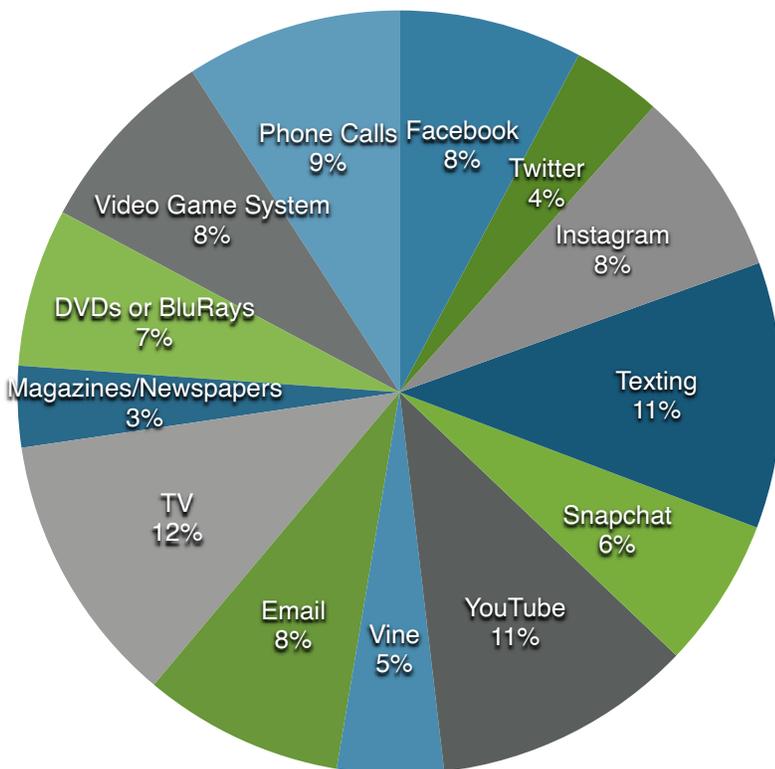
*5 students did not respond to this question

*none of these responses were included in the data

Appendix 7

MEDIA THAT STUDENTS USE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK

MEDIA	NUMBER OF TEENS THAT USE IT AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO USE IT AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK (ROUNDED TO THE NEAREST WHOLE PERCENT)
Facebook	131	53%
Twitter	64	26%
Instagram	134	54%
Texting	190	77%
Snapchat	107	43%
YouTube	186	76%
Vine	76	31%
Email	143	58%
TV	195	79%
Magazines/ Newspapers	58	24%
DVDs or BluRays	113	46%
Video Game System	136	55%
Phone Calls	154	63%

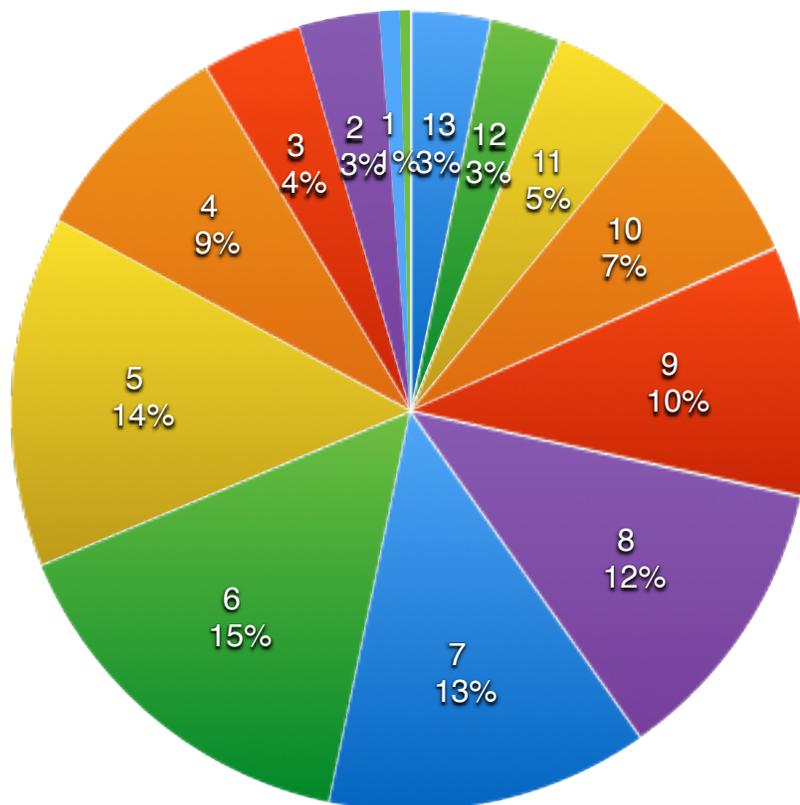


*1 students didn't select any
*6 students also wrote in "Tumblr"

Appendix 8

HOW MANY DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIA STUDENTS USE A LEAST ONCE A WEEK

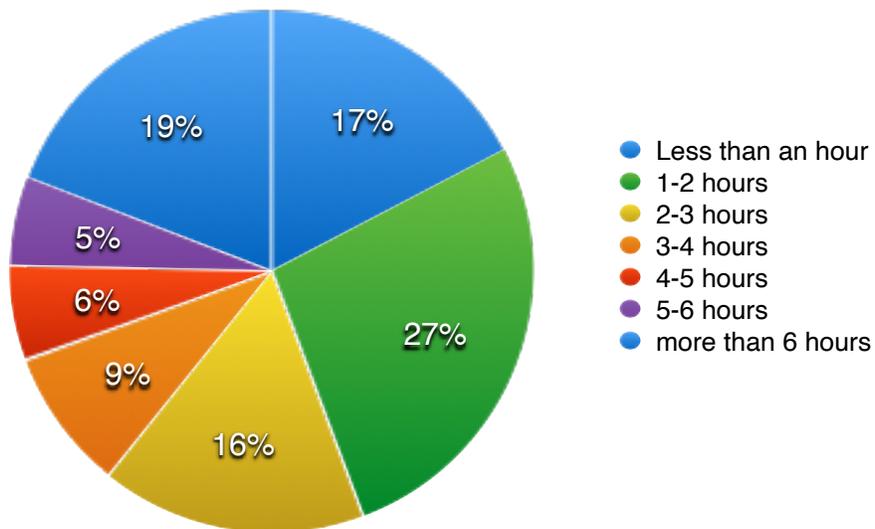
DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIA	RESPONSES
13	8
12	7
11	12
10	18
9	25
8	29
7	32
6	38
5	35
4	21
3	10
2	8
1	2
0	1



Appendix 9

AVERAGE TIME A DAY STUDENTS SPEND ON SOCIAL MEDIA

TIME	RESPONSES
Less than an hour	38
1-2 hours	59
2-3 hours	36
3-4 hours	19
4-5 hours	13
5-6 hours	12
more than 6 hours	42



*18 students did not respond to this question

*9 students gave too vague of a response to include in data

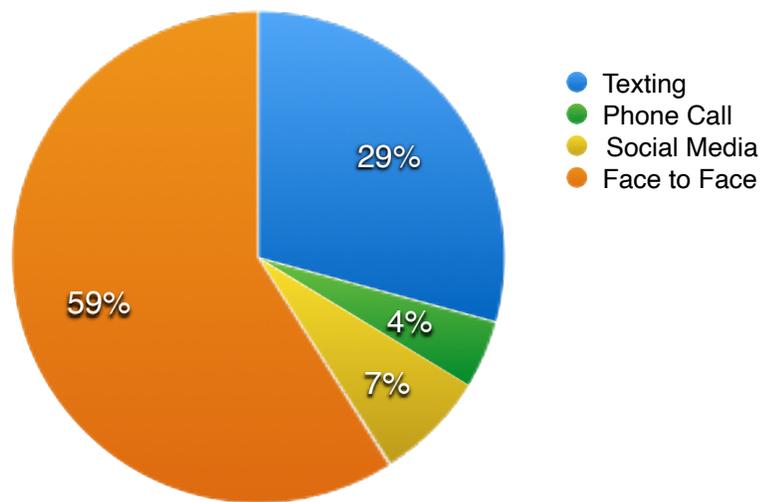
*none of these responses were included in the data

Appendix 10

HOW STUDENTS PREFER TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEIR FRIENDS

9) How do you prefer to communicate with your friends?

ANSWER	RESPONSES
Texting	52
Phone Call	8
Social Media	13
Face to Face	105



*2 students did not respond to this question

*1 student wrote in "xbox"

*65 students selected multiple answers

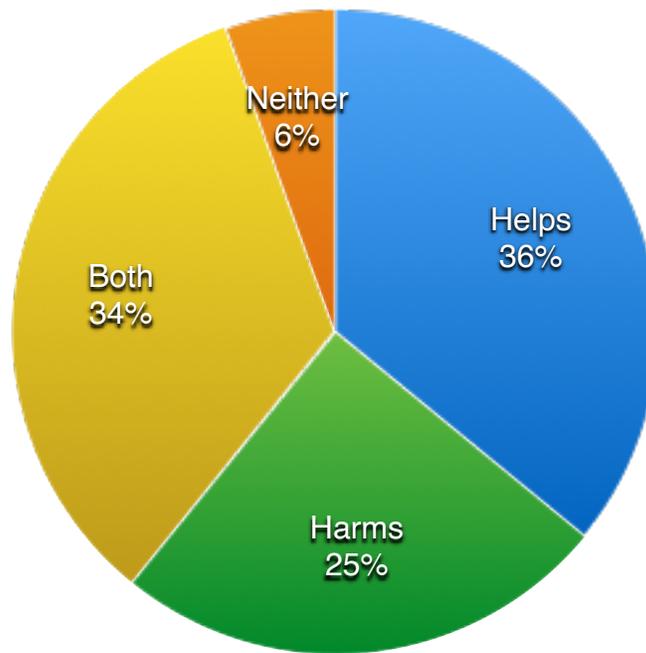
*none of these responses were included in the data

Appendix 11

DO STUDENTS THINK THAT SOCIAL MEDIA IS HARMFUL OR HELPFUL FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

10) Do you think that social media helps your relationships or harms them?

ANSWER	RESPONSES
Helps	78
Harms	54
Both	73
Neither	12



*21 students did not respond to this question

*1 student wrote "Haven't used it" (11 yrs old)

*7 students gave responses that were too vague to include in the data

*none of these responses were included in the data

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